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C O N F I D E N T I A L NICOSIA 000912

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TAGS: [PHUM CY](#)  
SUBJECT: ASYLUM SEEKERS PROTEST FOR RIGHTS IN CYPRUS;  
IMMIGRATION REFORM BADLY NEEDED

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

11. (C) Summary: As Cyprus struggles with a large influx of asylum seekers who have put a major strain on the limited facilities of this small country, NGO advocates contend that the situation for asylum seekers is increasingly desperate and that the GOC continues to deny them rights to which they are entitled under Cypriot law and EU directives. Over the last two months, asylum seekers in Nicosia have held a series of visible and sometimes dramatic demonstrations to protest this. The UNHCR representative in Cyprus, Christina Planas, told us on June 9 there was little she could do for the asylum seekers but UNHCR would continue to advocate for improved GOC immigration procedures. In May, illegal immigrants set fire to their detention cells in protest of their long imprisonment, sending five detainees and two police officers to the hospital. This was followed by suicide threats, hunger strikes, sit-ins, and marches of up to 800 people. On May 25, the government finally offered full benefits to 100 demonstrators camped on the premises of the local Red Cross. Just one week later, detained illegal immigrants began a new hunger strike that is still ongoing. On June 8, 20 Iraqi asylum seekers began a sit-in in front of the U.S. Embassy to request help in obtaining information on welfare benefits from the GOC. International human rights observers note that Cyprus's lack of immigration infrastructure has made the situation untenable. The Cypriot public, however, has demonstrated little sympathy for the plight of the asylum seekers. End Summary.

RIOTS, SUICIDE THREATS, HUNGER STRIKES  
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12. (U) Tensions between asylum seekers and the GOC have escalated strongly, beginning with a May 4 riot in Cyprus, Block 10 police detention cells of the Central Prison that put five detainees and two police officers in the hospital. Sixty Asian and Middle Eastern inmates set fire to their cells in protest of their long imprisonment (some have been held in short-term cells for over 20 months). In response, approximately 200-600 asylum seekers and their families from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq, the Palestinian Authority and Syria expressed their support for the detainees by camping in front of the Nicosia municipality to protest what they said was the denial of their human rights. The same week, another 150 asylum seekers marched on the Presidential Palace, complaining of poor living conditions, police abuse and racism.

13. (U) When these events yielded little official attention, four Kurdish asylum seekers threatened to jump from a

seven-story building in downtown Eleftheria Square if the government did not grant them resident permits. As a result, AKEL MP Eleni Mavrou secured a meeting for them with House President Demetris Christofias and a statement of support from the UNHCR. The asylum seekers complained of arbitrary arrests, threats of deportations, imprisonment, racism, the illegal denial of state welfare and medical benefits, and a lack of access to employment and housing. They emphasized that no government body independent of the police examined their cases and that they did not have access to lawyers and translators who were not connected to their embassies.

14. (U) Christofias provided assurances that he would take their concerns to the government, but the protesters remained in Eleftheria Square. On May 14, 800 demonstrators (according to estimates from Doros Polycarpou, director of the NGO "KISA" - Action for Equality, Support, and Anti-racism), including asylum seekers and a few sympathetic Cypriots, marched on the Central Prison. When further talks with Interior and Labor Ministry officials broke down, ten Syrian Kurds began a hunger strike. The 100 or so asylum seekers remaining in front of the municipality moved their tents to the premises of the Red Cross, where they stayed until the government gave in on May 25. Polycarpou told us that the GOC agreed to grant certified documents such as residency "pink slips," health cards, Alien Registration Cards, housing, and welfare benefits -- but only to the 100 Syrian Kurds who remained at the Red Cross. Finally, the GOC agreed to release a Pakistani immigrant who had been arrested during the protests.

15. (C) Polycarpou observed that the agreement was obviously a temporary fix and did nothing for the other 10,000 asylum seekers remaining in Cyprus without benefits. On June 2, the illegal immigrants in Block 10 began a new hunger strike that

is still ongoing. On June 8, a group called "Youth Against Nationalism" circulated an email letter of protest to the government, claiming that it had not made good on its promise to the asylum seekers at the Red Cross. Christina Planas of the UNHCR told us there was little her office could do but she would continue to advocate for improved GOC immigration procedures and respect of EU directives (which, she commented, the GOC was clearly ignoring). Planas said she had only received one complaint -- from a family that had been camped at the Red Cross -- but that indeed, they had not yet been granted benefits, and that the Larnaca asylum office had told them "it did not have time for them."

16. (C) On June 8, 20 Iraqi asylum seekers claiming to have been in Cyprus for over five years began a peaceful protest in front of Embassy Nicosia. They pitched tents and claimed that the government welfare services would not even tell them if they were eligible for benefits. Georg Siep of the UNHCR told us that as asylum seekers or as individuals eligible for "subsidiary protection," the Iraqi protesters were entitled to government benefits. On June 13, the Cypriot police removed the demonstrators, but they immediately returned.

#### NO IMMIGRATION INFRASTRUCTURE A BIG PROBLEM FOR LITTLE CYPRUS

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17. (U) Cyprus has seen an explosion of asylum applications in recent years. From 2000-2004, Cyprus received the largest number of asylum applications per capita of any country in Europe (22 applicants per 1,000 inhabitants). In 2005, over 6,000 new applications were filed. The Labor Ministry reported in May that at least 10,000 applications were still pending, despite the fact that the vast majority are rejected. Current law dictates that asylum applicants may be employed only in agriculture, but agriculture accounts for only 3.9% of the economy and cannot accommodate the growing number of asylum seekers. Doros Polycarpou has repeatedly told us that asylum seekers with pending applications are legally eligible to receive government welfare benefits in the approximate amount of CYP 200/month (for an individual) if they cannot find employment, but that there are several problems with this. First, the GOC refuses benefits if an

asylum seeker is offered a job but turns it down (some say they cannot perform agricultural work, or that the work is located in rural areas while their families are in the cities). Second, asylum seekers report that collective agreements establishing the minimum agricultural wage of CYP 365/month are not enforced, and that employers illegally deduct food and lodging from their pay. In 2005, the government recognized 25 asylees and paid welfare benefits to 319 asylum seekers in the amount of CYP 1.39m.

¶8. (U) Existing EU directives on asylum dictate that it is up to member countries to decide how and under what conditions to grant work permits to asylum grantees. In December 2005, the GOC began implementing a new directive to expedite the application process for asylum applicants, but delays remain. Polycarpou has complained that the directive does not allow adequate time for the proper investigation of cases and rather, that it paves the way for more expedient deportations and increases the danger of refoulement to third countries. As a result of the recent demonstrations, Planas said the UNHCR has offered its assistance to the GOC to set up a system to manage applications and improve social integration.

#### THE IRANIAN DILEMMA

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¶9. (U) Among the asylum seekers detained in Cyprus's Block 10 holding cells attached to the central prison, the government has held 26 Iranians for over ten months. The Cyprus police have confirmed that at least one of them injured himself deliberately during the last year (another Iranian whose application was denied attempted suicide, though he was not in custody; and an Iraqi detained for several months also attempted suicide). The Justice and Interior ministers have admitted publicly that the detention cells are overcrowded and unsuitable for detaining illegal immigrants.

¶10. (U) The GOC says it cannot deport the Iranians because they do not hold genuine travel documents, and that the Iranian government is not interested in repatriating these citizens. The press reported on May 12 that a Cypriot diplomatic delegation would be traveling to Teheran soon to develop paperwork to ease the deportations. The GOC says that unclaimed Iranian asylum seekers are a problem faced by

other European countries as well and that Teheran has failed to engage on the matter.

#### INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TAKING NOTE

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¶11. (U) Two reports from international groups commenting on the treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers were released during the two-week protest, lending credibility to the demonstrators, claims. The Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) report of May 12 said that Cyprus's continuing lack of a comprehensive immigration and integration policy had resulted in the particular vulnerability of immigrants to human rights violations, exploitation and discrimination. It also said that the extensive use of detention and the ill treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers was a concern. On May 23, Amnesty International released its 2006 report on Cyprus, saying that foreign nationals here had been unlawfully expelled, arbitrarily detained and ill-treated in police custody.

#### COMMENT

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¶12. (C) Cyprus is wrestling with many of the same questions surrounding immigration and asylum that bedevil other EU member states. The classic Cypriot response to this kind of problem is to do nothing, especially if doing something might have the twin undesirable effects of increasing Cyprus's attractiveness as an asylum destination and putting more pressure on GOC budgeteers who are trying to reduce outlays to meet Eurozone requirements. Much of the frustration

building among asylum seekers and would-be immigrants in Cyprus is that they simply cannot get any kind of response -- even a negative one -- from the government. The Cypriot public, meanwhile, has demonstrated little sympathy for the asylees. It is likely that the GOC will take meaningful steps to streamline its immigration and asylum procedures only under sustained pressure from the EU.

SCHLICHER